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## CONFLICT / COMMENTARY

# The Panchayati Raj system will be the new instrument of India's control over Kashmir



The prime minister Narendra Modi and the national security advisor Ajit Doval met the sarpanches elected in last year's panchayat polls, on 19 December. It is highly likely that the proposal to conduct elections to Kashmir's block development council marks the beginning of another façade of a democratic process. PIB

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On 24 August, the twentieth day of the Indian state's siege in Kashmir, Rohit Kansal, the official spokesperson for the Jammu and Kashmir government, held a press briefing in the Valley's garrisoned capital, Srinagar. "There has been an important decision taken regarding the elections to the block development councils as the next step towards operationalising and institutionalising the panchayat raj mechanism in the state," Kansal said. With the Indian government showing no real indications of ending the crackdown in Kashmir, the proposal to hold BDC elections raises questions about its underlying motivations.

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unilaterally de-operationalised Article 370 of the Constitution of India, which accorded a special status to the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. This decision was accompanied by a complete clamp down, which included the suspension of all means of telecommunication, a stringent curfew, and the deployment over 40,000 troops in Kashmir, in addition to the approximately 700,000 already present.

In the following weeks, news reports emerged that at least three people had been killed but Indian authorities were not issuing death certificates, and that over a hundred and fifty were injured by pellet shotguns and tear gas canisters. News reports also noted a drastic shortage of life-saving drugs across hospitals, though the government denied such claims. Rough estimates put the number of people who have been arrested at around 4,000, although this number could easily be far higher, considering that there is no proper record of arrests or detentions, especially where underage youth are being picked up. The arrested include the Kashmiri resistance leadership, pro-freedom activists and even the pro-India politicians in Kashmir.

In such an atmosphere, it took many by surprise when Rohit Kansal announced the BDC elections and their ongoing preparations. The BDCs are the second tier of local government under the Panchayati Raj system. The Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 prescribes panchayat elections every five years at three tiers—to the *halqas*, to the BDCs, and to the district development and planning boards. A halqa may comprise one village or a cluster of villages, and is governed by sarpanches and panches who are directly elected to the body. Members of the other two tiers, on the other hand, are indirectly elected by the members of the halqas.

On 3 September, a large delegation of sarpanches and panches, among others, met the home minister Amit Shah in Delhi to discuss the situation in Kashmir. These panchayat officials were among the members elected to power during the halqa panchayat elections conducted in November and December last year. The panchayat election had held little meaning because

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election of public officials who are loyal to the Indian government—at their meeting with Shah, sarpanch after sarpanch reportedly described how they had been empowered after the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status. Last year's elections also took place during the imposition of governor's rule, and enabled the Indian state to promote the very conduct of an electoral exercise in Kashmir as democratic progress, with no regard to the circumstances in which they were conducted.

At the meeting in Delhi, Shah told the delegation that the elections to the block development councils will be held in the next two months. He also promised them life insurance of Rs 2 lakh each, and said that the next chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir would be from among the delegation. The question arises: what does the Indian state's love for local governance in Kashmir signify? It is highly likely that it marks the beginning of another façade of a democratic process, which will, in turn, ensure the election of another tier of public officials who will be sympathetic to the Indian government. Given how the Indian state has functioned in Kashmir over the years, this could well be another smokescreen to project a sense of normalcy and participation in Kashmir, and continue its writ by creating a new class of political loyalists.

Ever since resolutions of United Nations called for a free and fair plebiscite in Jammu and Kashmir, in 1948, the Indian state has time and again militarily conducted elections as a means to legitimise its control of Kashmir and install a submissive government. This has notably included the imprisonment of the National Conference leader Sheikh Abdullah for over a decade, the brazen rigging of the 1987 assembly elections, and the repeated imposition of governor's rule. As a result, in practical terms, Kashmir has repeatedly been ruled directly from Delhi. Throughout, the Indian state has used the narrative of elections to claim that democratic governance prevails in Kashmir.

The 2018 panchayat elections were no exception. In his first address to the country after the revocation of Kashmir's special status, on 8 August, the

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representatives of the panchayats here will do stellar work,” Modi remarked. The previous day, speaking to the wire agency. Indo-Asian News Service, Modi had said that the 2018 panchayat elections reflected the people’s “strong commitment in favour of democracy.” He added, “The people voted in large numbers and did not get cowed by bullying ... the turnout in the panchayat elections was a record 74 percent.”

Modi’s claims about the turnout do not stand scrutiny. In Kashmir, only 30 percent of the halqas witnessed polling. A *Scroll* report analysing the elections noted that out of the 2,135 halqas in Kashmir, 708 remained vacant because there were no candidates, while 699 contestants were elected unopposed. Thus, as the report stated, there was no contest in as many as 1,407 *halqas*. In the 17,059 *panch* wards in Kashmir—a halqa is divided into several wards, each of which are headed by a panch—4,537 candidates won unopposed, and nearly 64 percent of the wards did not have a single candidate. In the restive south Kashmir, only 95 of the total 5,847 wards witnessed any polling—less than two percent.

In his speech, Modi also noted that last year’s panchayat elections were conducted successfully and “not a drop of blood was shed.” This claim, too, does not hold water. The final phase of the panchayat polls came in the backdrop of a militant attack on police personnel in the Shopian district of south Kashmir, which left four police personnel dead. A few days before the conclusion of the polls, two teenage militants were killed in an encounter that resulted in protests across the Valley. In fact, the circumstances surrounding the panchayat elections not only negate the claim about there being no bloodshed, it underlines the festering conflict in Kashmir and how India’s actions continue to strengthen the popular, militant opposition to the state.

Since the 2016 uprising, and particularly after the political turmoil that followed the split between the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party, the pro-India politicians lost the last semblances of credibility even among their own cadre. This was

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had little contact with the people.

To give credence to its argument that the panchayat elections had revived grass-roots democracy, the Indian government initiated a much-hyped week-long “back to village” programme in June this year, during which bureaucrats visited village panchayats. Soon after, the Press Trust of India reported that an “official spokesperson” had said that the programme was receiving “a massive response, especially from people in the militancy-infested areas.” Later that month, in his regular radio broadcast, *Mann ki Baat*, Modi hailed the programme: “In the ‘Back to Village’ programme, officials were asked to spend at least two days and one night in villages, but some officers were so overwhelmed by the hospitality of the people that they decided to stay a bit longer.” The government’s intentions were apparent. This was perhaps the Indian government’s first real experiment in its plan to project panchayats as the face of democracy in Kashmir—a plan that appears to be unfolding right now.

This sudden interest in panchayats is likely part of a greater scheme in which these institutions would be given enough powers to pave the way for Indians to settle in Jammu and Kashmir, and help the Indian state carry out the intended demographic changes. This could include giving the panchayats and municipal bodies decisive powers—first, over state land, and subsequently over other private holdings as well. All the while, local self-governments in Kashmir will be hailed as a means of promoting grass-roots democracy, which will serve as the Indian state’s narrative about Kashmir.

To this end, the grass-roots democracy pitch also allows India to claim that it is catering to the needs and aspirations of the local populace, by using the fact that the prevailing conflict in the region has led to consecutive governments ignoring the people’s aspirations. Similarly, the BJP has frequently invoked the dynastic and elitist politics of Kashmir as a failure of its democracy. It is likely then that the the BJP government will present the institution of panchayats as the necessary antidote of decentralisation to

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unlike previous regimes, is fully invested in restoring a proper institutional structure.

During the decades of its control over Kashmir, the Indian state has engaged in asymmetric warfare tactics—in the form of extrajudicial killings, torture, gendered violence, enforced disappearances and mass blinding—and has also sought to control the Kashmiri psyches, spaces, memories and narratives. This regulation of Kashmiri lives and bodies through curfews, checkpoints, concertina wires and surveillance has been normalised by the Indian media, which has sought to justify the Indian siege in Kashmir in the name of national interest. This media narrative has also helped the state present a benevolent picture of the role of the Indian armed personnel in promoting development and empowerment in Kashmir, while shifting the focus away from its repressive counter-insurgency measures.

During the peak of the Kashmiri militancy of the 1990s, the panchayats had been suspended citing the argument that they could be used and hijacked by militants to act as parallel governments. Yet, this has not been a consideration for the BJP government, despite the volatile political environment and the mass support for militants visible during their funerals and during clashes between security forces and civilians outside encounter sites. The explanation is fairly simple—public discourse in India openly aligns with a strict masculine military action against anti-national Kashmiris. The present ruling dispensation has no need to hold on to a liberal façade, as was the case with the Indian government of the 1990s, and a crackdown on militants would be welcomed by the Indian public. As a result, if militants do choose to halt the BDC election process with threats or attacks, the state can use it to its benefit by highlighting how there is support from across the border for fringe elements to target democracy in Kashmir.

It remains to be seen how this entire mechanism will be laid out and brought into play, especially in terms of the social fault-lines. But the



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functioning in Kashmir, even as thousands of people remain caged during such exercises, and while large numbers opt for a boycott. The proposal to conduct BDC elections at this stage, when Kashmiris have been under siege for over one month and even pro-India politicians are under detention, clearly marks the state's intent to continue its control over Kashmir. Any indication by the Indian government that it seeks to fulfil the collective aspirations of the Kashmiri population is clearly illusory.

It is no secret that the successive regimes in Kashmir have only remained in power as long as the Indian state wants them to. Over the years, the powers of these local cliental regimes were downgraded, governments were deposed and the leaders were jailed until they gave up the last remnants of Kashmir's autonomy. Therefore, it is not hard to claim that even if panchayats become the new centre of attention and investment for the Indian state in Kashmir, it would be subject to even more stringent control. Indeed, a state that is denying an entire population the right to a dignified life can only constrain governance, and not aid people's empowerment.

The BDC elections are the state's way of cultivating a new political class suited to its interests, while also forcing the pro-India political groups to either collaborate with the state or be out of the power lobby. With panchayats as the new instrument of control for the Indian government, it could also mean more intensive militarisation seeping deeper into the social fabric, and into people's private and collective spaces.

On the ground, the absence of widespread protests to the decision on Article 370 took many observers by surprise. But as a Kashmiri resident told the *Indian Express*, "We are quiet but don't misunderstand our silence as surrender. This silence is strategic. They want us to react. But we know; it is a long battle ahead." Kashmiris across the valley appear to be strategising and weighing their options at this point. The increased visibility in the international media has also brought the Kashmiri diaspora into action, leading protest marches across the globe. As India continues its manipulation of the narratives from Kashmir, with little intervention from